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How effective are Chinese media in shaping audiences' attitudes towards China? A survey analysis in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper measures how often audiences in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa consume Chinese media, and investigates whether a positive relationship exists between the consumption of English language Chinese media and attitudes towards China.
Method: We analyze three waves of survey data collected in 2017/2018, 2020 and 2021 ($N = 5876$) in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa.
Findings: We show that, while Chinese State-owned news media have a growing but limited following, the minority of media users who report getting news from Chinese media have better attitudes towards China than those who don't.
Implications: Our findings suggest that Beijing's external communication activities might have the potential to fulfil Beijing's goal of improving the country's image overseas, provided that media reached a wider audience.
Value: The paper overcomes the limitations of previous studies on the reception of Chinese external communication practices in Africa (i.e., small sample sizes, failure to differentiate between increased presence and increased impact, and use of indirect rather direct measures of media use to infer possible effects on public opinion).

Keywords: Africa, attitudes, CGTN, *China Daily*, CRI, media, telecommunications, Sino-African relations, Xinhua

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1 Introduction

The increased presence of Chinese actors in Africa, from telecommunication companies, to mining contractors, diplomats, journalists, and traders, has received much scholarly and media attention in recent years (Alden 2007; Hanauer and Morris 2014). For some, the economic activities of China on the continent have been mired in controversy, for reasons including allegations about labor practices, environmental impact, and extraction of resources (French 2014). Some of these allegations, however, have been challenged (Bräutigam 2009; Park and Benabdallah 2021; Yan and Sautman 2012), and criticized for perpetuating a "predator" narrative of Chinese engagements with the Global South (Bräutigam 2015) that could have the potential to damage China's reputation among foreign audiences, as many Chinese officials and scholars have suggested (see, for example, Liu 2012). Despite these media narratives, public opinion surveys across Africa have shown a general upward trend in attitudes towards China in the last decade (Lekorwe et al. 2016), as opposed to those in other parts of the world (Silver, Devlin and Huang 2020), only halted by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that followed the detection of the first cases in Wuhan, China, in late 2019 (Appiah-Nyamekye and Selormey 2020).

A significant amount of attention on China's "return to Africa" (Alden 2007) has been on the increased footprint of Chinese media on the continent (Li 2017; Zhang et al. 2016). Madrid-Morales (2016) has contended that the recent push by Beijing for more mediated engagements with Africa can be explained by the desire of Chinese media to increase their market share and strengthen the country's discursive power in the global arena. Extending the presence of China's media, particularly State-owned companies, in Africa is one of the pillars of "people-to-people exchanges," which have been a central component of all the declarations of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). These "people-to-people exchanges" are at the core of Beijing's public diplomacy toolkit (d'Hooghe 2015), which is primarily focused on relationship building (Benabdallah 2019). The assumption is that good relationships between people can support inter-state relationships, "deepen understanding and friendships between Chinese and African people and avoid misunderstandings" (Zeng and Zhan 2018, 95). This aim underpins the promotion of cultural and social activities such as festivals and tourism, as well as volunteer work and exchanges of researchers, scientists, and journalists (Zeng and Zhan 2018, 95). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, this commitment to cooperation and exchanges has been reconfirmed by the FOCAC meeting in Dakar, Senegal, in November 2021, and the desire expressed to "deepen and expand China-Africa cooperation" (FOCAC 2021). While, officially described as “exchanges” and “cooperation” in official documents (see, for instance, FOCAC 2015), there’s limited reciprocity for African media companies to operate freely and widely in China, the way Chinese companies do in Africa (Madrid-Morales 2021a, 52). Such “media cooperation” activities include better and more sympathetic coverage of both Africa and China, exchanges and cooperation of journalists and media representatives, workshops, training, and education (Bailard 2016, 447). In this process, Chinese media outlets like China Global Television Network (CGTN) are competing with other global news networks such as the BBC, Al-Jazeera, and CNN for African audiences, partly by promising a more positive view of China-Africa relations than Western media (Gorfinkel et al. 2014, 81–82).

Even though Chinese media have played an important part in Beijing’s foreign policy towards Africa since the 1950s (Cooley 1965; Pradet 1963), scholarly attention on the topic only began to grow in the early 2000s, when several renewed initiatives were launched and turned Nairobi, Kenya, into the epicenter of Sino-African media “cooperation”. These initiatives included the establishment of the regional headquarters of Xinhua (a news agency), the launch of a multilingual FM radio station by China Radio International (CRI) and the development of Africa-focused programming by CGTN from a broadcast and production center. Since then, many more FM radio stations have opened across most of West and Central Africa (Mihoubi 2019), and the number of Xinhua and CGTN bureaus grown fast (Xin 2009).

For most of this time, Beijing’s efforts in the African media sector have concentrated on five areas: content production, content distribution, infrastructure development, direct investment in African media and various training and exchange sponsorships of African journalists and students (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman 2018, 1222). In 2019, after a global public image crisis caused by Beijing’s response to anti-government protests in Hong Kong in response to an extradition bill, a sixth area of engagement was added to the mix: managing foreign public opinion, particularly around potentially damaging topics, either via social media by State-sponsored media outlets and so-called “Wolf Warrior” diplomats, through coordinated top-down information campaigns (Douzet et al. 2021), and/or via “borrowing boats to sail overseas” (*jie chuan chu hai*), an expression that refers to using—in addition to Chinese media presence in other countries—domestic media in the target countries to promote ideas aligned with China’s preferred media and political narratives (Rolland 2021). Various mechanisms have been used to achieve this objective of extending the reach of China’s state media internationally, including bilateral and multilateral content exchange agreements, the funding of media training and think-tanks, financing inserts in local media, and conferences, summits and exchanges between journalists and editors (Geall and Soutar 2018, 14; Gill 2020).

Focusing on the three African countries (Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa) where the presence of Chinese media has been most felt in recent years, this paper is aimed at assessing how effective China's mediated external communication, particularly international broadcasting, efforts are in creating more positive attitudes toward the country among the general public. We use data from three rounds of online surveys conducted in late 2017/early 2018, mid-2020 and mid-2021 to quantify the audience of Chinese media *vis-à-vis* that of other national and international media and trace the evolution of different metrics of China's national image to measure attitudes towards the country. We then show that consumption of Chinese media is associated with more positive attitudes towards China.

2 Chinese media, African audiences

Besides diplomatic ties, educational programs, travel and tourism and the establishment of Confucius Institutes at African universities (see Batchelor and Zhang 2017 for a description of some of these programs), Beijing's "people-to-people" cooperation efforts since the 2000s have focused significantly on the extension of Chinese influence in the African media sphere (Bailard 2016, 447). Influence operations have materialized in different forms and through different programs, including a) the signing of "exchange" agreements between African and Chinese State-owned own media; b) the creation of media content targeted at African audiences and distributed on Chinese and African platforms; c) the growth of Chinese voices (e.g., diplomats, journalists, scholars…) and China-favorable African voices on local African media as well as on social networking sites; and, d) the development of free-of-charge training programs by Chinese universities and media organizations aimed at African media professionals.

This barrage of programs and activities has generated criticism and anxiety, particularly in Europe and North America, for its perceived potential to undermine freedom of speech and the culture of independent and critical journalism in African democracies (Cook 2013). For example, Chinese investments in human resource development and training programs have been viewed as successful ways to socialize African journalists in "Chinese values, norms, and expert knowledge" and "build a positive image of China in Africa" (Benabdallah 2019, 495). These programs are seen to create a new class of "mediators" who can diffuse Chinese culture among African populations and promote Chinese government ideas and objectives (Diakon and Röschenthaler 2017, 96). This socialization is viewed by some commentators in liberal democracies as a threat, with some suggesting that China is trying to eradicate independent journalism (Keita 2012). Research into the impact of these and other projects on African journalistic communities

(Madrid-Morales and Wasserman 2018; Maweu 2016; Nyirongo 2020; Wasserman 2016) has, however, revealed a much more complex picture, with a spectrum of attitudes and positions towards Chinese media ranging from resistance to adoption, with various nuances in-between. This variance in attitude can also be noted in media coverage of Chinese investment in Africa in general, depending on the media outlet concerned. One study (Matanji 2022) has found that African media frame these investments in a more positive light than their counterparts in the US and UK.

Journalists and media professionals are only one of multiple potential audiences. Despite the many warnings and anxieties, very little evidence exists of the actual impact on the general public. Research about Sino-African mediated exchanges has tended to address the "upstairs" dimensions of China's evolving engagement with the African media space—the structural economic and political aspects—instead of the "downstairs" dimension of its social and cultural implications in everyday life (Park and Alden 2013). Whatever influence Chinese media may have on African audiences would, in any case, be difficult to measure in terms of a direct causality, as the long history of media influence and effects has established. There has been, however, some support for the assumption that regular media consumption may, in a moderate degree, contribute to civic participation and political interest, but such influence should be understood alongside the influence of other political and social factors (Livingstone and Markham 2008). Similarly, when "nation branding" takes place through the consumption of popular media and cultural goods, this process should not be seen as a direct, causal influence, but one that is refracted through complex relations of hybridization and localization (Huang 2011). In this regard, Gorfinkel et al. (2014: 82) argue for a localized study of Chinese media in Africa, looking not only at the political, economic, and rhetorical aspects of China's global media efforts, but also to the "on-the-ground realities of and responses to these soft power efforts". As Diakon and Röschenthaler (2017, 97) point out, "it is necessary to investigate how much evidence there is that the Chinese media engagement has the ability to influence African thinking and acting, rather than merely assuming that this is the case". As the authors further ague, China's media presence in Africa is not an exception – similar ventures have been made into other parts of the world, and China's African media platforms exist alongside much bigger international players from North America, Europe, and the Middle East.

Only a few studies (Bailard 2016; Guyo and Yu 2019; Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2018; Xiang 2018a, 2018b; Zhang and Mwangi 2016) have begun to explore the actual consumption of Chinese media by African audiences and, ultimately, their influence on public opinion. These studies find a much less direct, causal, and homogenous impact of Chinese media on African audiences than is often assumed by critics who see the China-Africa media relationship as a threat. For instance, Bailard (2016) investigated the correlation between opinion toward China in six African countries and the presence of Chinese media in those countries over time. Her findings suggest that the increase presence of Chinese media in Africa "*may* have had the intended effect of improving African public opinion toward China" (italics added). However, in a study with young media users in South Africa and Kenya, Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2018) found Chinese media to have had little impact. Attitudes among these media users were predominantly negative and there were persistent stereotypes about China that affected opinions about Chinese media, and about China.

When taken together, previous studies—including our own—on Chinese media's audience in African countries have one or more of the following three limitations. They tend to rely on small sample sizes, and are often focused on specific sub-groups of the population (e.g., African students in China, journalism students in South Africa, media professionals in Mali…). This makes it difficult to make inferences about the general population. Also, because each of these studies uses different research designs and measures of media use, comparisons between studies, and therefore between countries, is not possible. Moreover, most studies fail to differentiate between increased presence and increased impact. Chinese media often tout their success in extending their presence across the continent. Examples of such "achievements" go from the alleged high rating of Chinese soap operas in Tanzania (Wang 2013) to the thousands of rural villagers benefiting from the setting up satellite dishes to watch StarTimes in 10,000 rural communities across Africa (Xinhua 2016). The collection of these reports leads some to equate presence to impact. With limited work on the actual lived experiences of users with these types of mediated engagements, their impact cannot be simply assumed. Finally, several studies use indirect (e.g., presence/absence of Xinhua in a country) rather direct measures (e.g., how often people watch CGTN) of media use to infer effects on public opinion. Acknowledging the limitations of previous work, and against the backdrop of very limited quantitative data on media use by the general public, we ask:

RQ_1: What has been the audience size of global Chinese media between 2017 and 2021?

RQ_2: What are audiences' perceptions of Chinese media operating in Africa *vis-à-vis* other global media?

3 Public opinion towards China in sub-Saharan Africa

Measuring the audience of Chinese media does not solve the question of how impactful they are, and how widespread said impact might be. As Awoonor and Forson (2020) show in the Ghanaian and Togolese contexts, perceptions of China as a trade partner are influenced by a range of factors, including the country of origin, knowledge of and orientation toward China. In addition, multiple narratives on China's role in a country might coexist. These narratives are often imbued with domestic political concerns, and the China-Africa relationship then becomes viewed through the lens of local politics. An example of this can be seen in South Africa, where media professionals tend to see Chinese engagement in the media space through a domestic lens (Madrid-Morales and Wasserman 2018). When a Chinese consortium invested in a local media group, Independent Media, concerns about editorial independence centered in the first place around the close relationship between the new owner, Iqbal Survé, and high-placed members of the ruling party, the African National Congress. (ANC). The Chinese investment in Survé's company was seen as a confirmation of his alignment with political power. Survé has since also come under strong criticism from the South African media establishment for his generally poor management of the company and questionable ethical decisions at the group's publications (Dasnois and Whitfield 2019). But it is not only political elites who interpret events through domestic lenses. In Zimbabwe, Mano (2016) has noted that there's diverging views between elite discourses on China, and the views held by some Harare residents. This divergence in attitudes maps onto domestic ideological divides.

Across most of Africa, there seems to have been a shift from early days of Sino-Africa engagement, when debates first centered on China's interest in the extractive industries, before emphasis moved towards macro-economic and structural aspects related to Sino-African cooperation within the FOCAC agreement, such as loans, infrastructure, and debt (Shinn and Eisenman 2012). In recent years, these debates have become more complex. Perhaps because of increased mobility, exchanges and popular media attention to China–Africa relations, the earlier focus on structural issues converged into a complex set of new narratives. Furthermore, Africans' attitudes towards China are dynamic rather than static, and tend to be shaped by specific events or issues. Controversial events like racist attitudes and maltreatment of African residents in the Chinese city of Guangzhou in 2020 (Olander 2020), illegal mining by Chinese migrants in Ghana and reports of human rights abuses, labor violations and environmental damage by Chinese fishing companies in African waters (Olander 2021) have all received local media attention and may indicate some deteriorating of attitudes towards China's involvement in Africa.

The impact of these controversies might be seen in cross-national public opinion surveys. Attitudes towards China seems to have grown more negative in recent years. Data from the 2014/2015 Afrobarometer, the largest cross-national public opinion and social values survey on the continent covering three dozen countries (Lekorwe et al. 2016), show that China's economic involvement on the continent was largely seen as positive, and China was ranked as the second-best development model globally (after the USA). However, a more recent Afrobarometer, conducted in 2019/2020, showed that while Africans still hold positive views of China's political and economic influence on the continent, the perceived positive influence of China on African economies has somewhat waned (Selormey 2020).

This dip in attitudes might be a consequence of Beijing being accused of responding late to the outbreak of COVID-19 in the city of Wuhan. Throughout the global public health crisis that ensued the first cases, China has occupied a central place in discourses around the pandemic as the possible country of origin, as a global provider of aid and assistance, and as an 'Other' in political discourses. A Pew Research Center survey in late-2020 found that across 14 countries with advanced economies (Silver et al. 2020), a majority had a negative opinion of China, the most unfavorable in a decade. These views seem closely linked to the COVID-19 outbreak: two thirds of people across these nations said they thought China did a poor job in handling the outbreak. After receiving global criticism for its handling of the outbreak, China tried to shift the narrative around its response to the pandemic in several ways (Jacob 2020). It firstly focused its messaging on emphasizing the country's efforts to mitigate and control the pandemic. Secondly, it sought to highlight the ways in which other countries also struggled to cope with their own outbreaks. Thirdly, China's aid and assistance was advertised widely and prominently. Fourthly, the legitimacy and strength of the Chinese political system was foregrounded, often comparing it to the failures of other countries such as the US. A fifth tactic was to deflect blame away from China by pushing the notion that the virus respected no borders and posed a global challenge. Some of these narratives made their way on to African digital media, but most did not, or only had a marginal space (Madrid-Morales 2021b).

These communication strategies, particularly when the messaging is predominantly focused on cooperation and "friendship", argue Mattingly and Sundquist (2022), might help improve perceptions of China among foreign audiences. Their findings in an experimental setting would seem to concur with work by Bailard (2016), who used longitudinal survey data to reveal a positive relationship between the presence of Chinese media in African countries and better attitudes towards China. These two studies, the only two that have quantitatively attempted to measure the relationship between exposure to Chinese messaging and attitudes towards the country, were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, which, as we discussed earlier, would seem to have impacted global public opinion on China. Taking this evidence as a starting point, we propose two additional research questions:

RQ_3: How have attitudes towards China evolved from 2017 to 2021?

RQ_4: Is consumption of Chinese media associated with better attitudes towards China?

4 Methods

This paper uses data from three rounds of online surveys conducted between December 2017 and February 2018 (round 1), May and August 2020 (round 2), and September and October 2021 (round 3) in Kenya and South Africa. In addition, we collected data in Nigeria in rounds 1 and 2, but not in round 3 due to limited availability of funds. Surveys were first conducted in 2017/2018 prior to the 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), which is a peak time of news coverage on Africa-China issues. They were then repeated in 2020 at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (a time when, as Madrid-Morales (2021b) notes, China and Chinese authorities were at the center of news coverage in most parts of the world), and again in 2021, when many pandemic related restrictions were lifted, and news coverage related to China and COVID-19 had subdued.

The three countries were selected because they represent three distinct geographic regions in Africa (East, West and Southern), act as regional media hubs and, alongside, Egypt, are the countries where Chinese mediated engagements have been most felt. Kenya, for example, is where (almost) all Chinese media on the continent are headquartered. In 2021, a new building hosting the newsrooms of leading news organizations like CGTN, and Xinhua was built in Nairobi. South Africa is home to the editorial office of *Chinafrica*, a monthly magazine affiliated with the *Renmin Ribao* (or *People's Daily*), the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and is the sole country where Chinese investors have acquired media assets: a 20% stake in the Independent Media group, the third largest publishing house in the country (McKune 2013). As for Nigeria, given its population size, it has become an important market for Chinese media companies, including StarTimes, a pay TV provider that creates content in widely spoken languages in Nigeria such as Hausa and Yoruba. According to Madrid-Morales (2017), Nigeria is one of the markets in which CGTN has been most interested and has even made certain hiring decisions (e.g., to recruit Nigerian anchors) to increase its audience in the country.

4.1 Sample

Over the course of three waves, we recruited 5876 participants through a European market research firm, Splendid Research, that keeps online panels in the three countries of interest. The company has been operation since 2008, is a member for ESOMAR, the "world's most important market research association", and follows its quality standard principles, and has been used in previous research by the authors (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019). Participants were compensated by the firm for completing the survey. In wave 1, which acted as a pilot study, we surveyed 1077 individuals ($N_{\text{Kenya}} = 361$; $N_{\text{Nigeria}} = 395$; $N_{\text{South Africa}} = 321$); in wave 2, our sample includes 2986 individuals ($N_{\text{Kenya}} = 1034$; $N_{\text{Nigeria}} = 858$; $N_{\text{South Africa}} = 1094$); and, during wave 3, 1813 individuals were interviewed ($N_{\text{Kenya}} = 899$; $N_{\text{South Africa}} = 914$). As previous scholarship on the use of different forms of survey research in Africa has shown (Lau et al. 2019), most approaches that rely on technology to administer questionnaires tend to overrepresent young, urban, and digitally connected parts of the population. Our sample did also skew in the same direction. To overcome some of these biases, we enforced, when possible, quotas around gender and age during data collection. Nonetheless, because surveys were administered online, the population this study describes only includes those with access to the Internet, and not the entire population. It can be argued, however, that this segment of the population is also the most likely to consume English-language Chinese media. The mean age of our sample is 35 years (SD = 11.87), and it includes slightly more males (51.9%) than females. The median education level is "Some University Education". A breakdown of demographic characteristics is provided in Table 1.

4.2 Measures

The main dependent variable in this study is *attitudes towards China*. To measure this, we adapted a scale developed by Anholt (2009; see also, GfK 2009). We asked survey respondents to tell us their level of agreement with five statements included in the original Anholt scale (attitudes towards China's governance, "China is competently and honestly governed"; respect of citizen rights, "China respects the rights of its citizens and treats them with fairness"; environmental policies, "China behaves responsibly to protect the environment"; media freedom, "The media in China are free and objective"; and, desire to live in China "China is a country where I would like to live and work"), plus one additional statement that referred to China's influence on Africa ("China has a positive economic and political

Table 1: Demographic variables by country and wave.

	Kenya			Nigeria			South Africa		
	2018	**2020**	**2021**	**2018**	**2020**	**2021**	**2018**	**2020**	**2021**
Age (M)									
M	30.7	33.8	35.1	30.9	32.4	–	35.7	35.1	38.9
SD	9.17	10.9	11.6	8.49	11.8	–	11.6	12.2	13.3
Gender (%)									
Male	64.5	52.5	51.4	71.0	52.8	–	47.4	50.4	50.9
Female	35.5	47.5	48.6	29.0	47.2	–	52.6	49.6	49.1
Education (%)									
Up to primary school	0.30	0.30	0.33	0.30	0.40	–	–	1.10	0.44
Some secondary	1.16	0.70	0.80	0.90	0.70	–	4.41	4.02	2.74
Secondary completed	35.8	36.8	35.6	21.6	27.2	–	51.5	55.1	49.1
Some university	14.8	10.7	9.68	11.5	13.1	–	12.5	10.4	9.96
University completed	48.0	51.5	53.6	65.7	58.7	–	31.6	29.3	37.7
N =	361	1034	899	395	858	–	321	1094	914

influence on the African continent”). We averaged out all the responses to create a single measure (α = 0.86), ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

To measure the main independent variable, *Chinese media consumption*, we presented survey participants with four questions, asking them to indicate “which of the following television stations/radio stations/newspapers/websites did you watch/listen/read to get your news in the past seven days? Select all that apply.” A different list was created for each of the countries. In all of them, we included one or more Chinese media (e.g., CGTN, Xinhua, *China Daily*, CRI…), multiple international media organizations (e.g., *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, BBC, CNN, RFI…) and some of the most well-known domestic media houses (e.g., *Daily Nation* in Kenya; SABC in South Africa; *Punch* in Nigeria). For each of the four questions, we presented survey respondents with 10–12 options, and we gave them the option to write additional news sources. The additional responses were then manually inspected and coded. A single measure of *Chinese media consumption* (M = 0.1; SD = 0.37) was computed by aggregating the number of Chinese media a respondent selected. The minimum was 0 and the maximum in the sample was 4. We also computed a *global media consumption* metric (M = 1.6; SD = 2.00) ranging from 0 to 13 in the sample. We also asked participants whether they had access to any pay TV services to be able to measure the spread of StarTimes, which is regarded as one of the most influential Chinese media companies on the continent. This was recorded as a dichotomous variable (1 = yes, 0 = no), with around 5% of respondents saying yes (i.e., they had an active paid subscription to StarTimes).

Several covariates and controls are included in our regression analysis to address RQ_4. In addition to general demographic variables (age, education, gender, and country), we also controlled for general *media use*. We asked participants "How often do you make use of the following type of media to get your news?" We recorded *media use* for TV, radio, social media, print (magazines and newspapers) and news websites on a scale from 0 (never) to 4 (every day). We also registered respondents' views on how important China's presence in Africa was to them (*issue involvement*). To reduce the priming effect of this question, we provided respondents with four issues (e.g., "The number of corruption cases in my country" or "The occurrence of military coups in parts of Africa") alongside the measure of interest ("The increased presence of China in Africa"). Issue involvement was measured on a scale from 0 (not important) to 4 (extremely important). Only the item referring to China is used in the analysis (M = 2.53; SD = 1.25).

Finally, we asked for participants' *views on CGTN*, as the most well-known Chinese media organization operating in Africa, in comparison to four other international broadcasters (BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, and RT). We asked respondents to rank the stations on four statements ("Can be trusted", "Reports on Africa objectively, "Always tells the truth." and "It is a source I know well") using a scale ranging from 1 (best described by the statement) to 5 (least described by the statement). Descriptive statistics for this variable are presented in Tables 2 (overall scores for each of the five TV channels) and 3 (scores for CGTN for each of the statements).

Table 2: Evaluations of five international television networks among Kenyans, Nigerians and South African (2018 & 2021).

	Kenya		Nigeria		South Africa	
	2018	**2021**	**2018**	**2021**[a]	**2018**	**2021**
Al Jazeera	2.82	2.59	2.84	–	3.19	3.01
BBC	2.10	2.00	2.25	–	2.35	2.03
CGTN	3.44	3.72	3.48	–	3.31	3.62
CNN	2.21	2.19	2.12	–	2.40	2.13
RT	4.44	4.35	4.30	–	3.77	4.04
N =	361	899	395	–	321	1094

A score of 1 indicates best ranked, and a score of 5 indicates lowest rank; [a]The question was not asked in the Nigerian survey in 2021.

5 Findings

We found the audience of Chinese media to be generally low, particularly when compared to that of other international media organizations (RQ_1), even though we did observe a slight upward trend between 2018 and 2021, as well as differences across countries and media houses. As we show in Figure 1, CGTN viewership appears to have grown in both Kenya and South Africa during the period covered by our data. While, in 2018 around 5.5% of respondents in Kenya and 1.6% in South Africa claimed to have watched the station to get news in the seven days before the survey, the figure jumped in South Africa to around 7.1% and increased to 6.3% in Kenya in 2021. In Nigeria, from 2018 to 2020, viewership rose from 6.3 to 11%. Despite this growth, CGTN—which appears to be, by far, the most popular of all Chinese media houses operating in Africa—remains much less popular than other international television stations with a much longer history of engagement with the continent. Audience for the BBC, for instance, surpasses the 30–40% threshold across all three countries.

Audience figures are much lower for CRI, which, despite having been in operation in the three countries for decades, appears to have failed to grow a substantial audience (Figure 2). In 2018, between 0.3 and 0.8% of respondents identified CRI as a source of news. In 2021, it reached 1.9% in Kenya and 1.4% in South Africa, even though differences between years were not statistically significant. In the South African market, international broadcasters appear to have little influence (CRI ranks around the same place as France's RFI, US's VOA and UK's BBC). In Kenya and Nigeria, the BBC would seem to remain a popular source of information, with the other international stations being much less popular.

To wrap up our responses to RQ_1, we can look at newspaper data (Figure 3). Our data suggest that *China Daily* has also failed to carve up a space in the news diet, even though we do observe a similar upward trend over the three-year period. In 2018, around 1% of Nigerians claimed *China Daily* as one of their news sources; the number increased to 2.8% in 2020. The increase was more modest in the case of South Africa (2018, 0.6%; 2020, 1.2%; 2021, 1.9%) and Kenya (2018, 0.8%; 2020, 1.8%; 2021, 2.3%). A possible explanation of this increase could be that the COVID-19 outbreak made our survey respondents more interested in reading about the situation in China, or that they started following some of these Chinese media organizations on social media – the wording of our question did not specifically ask respondents what medium they used to access content from each of the news sources. Regardless of the possible explanations of the upward trend we identify across countries and across media, the overall picture that our data present is that

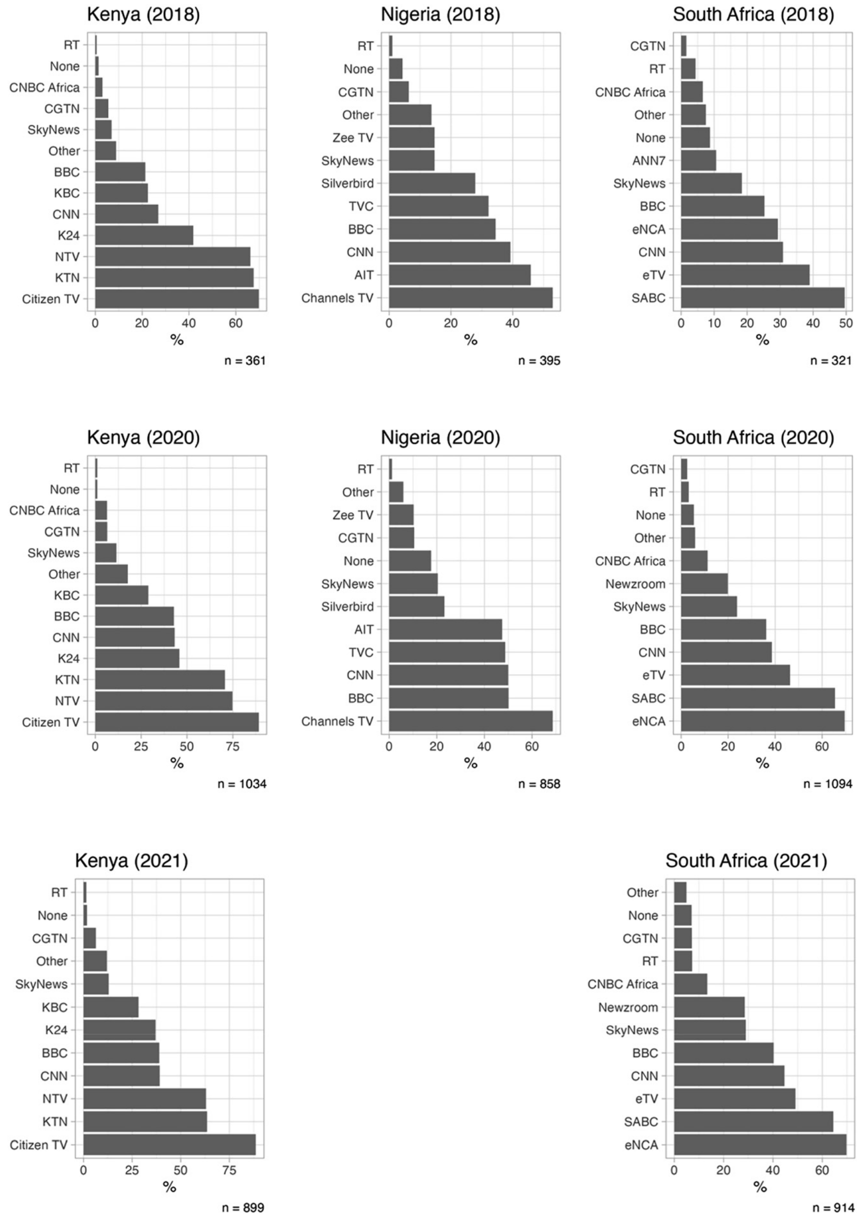

Figure 1: Viewership of selected stations in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa (2018–2021).

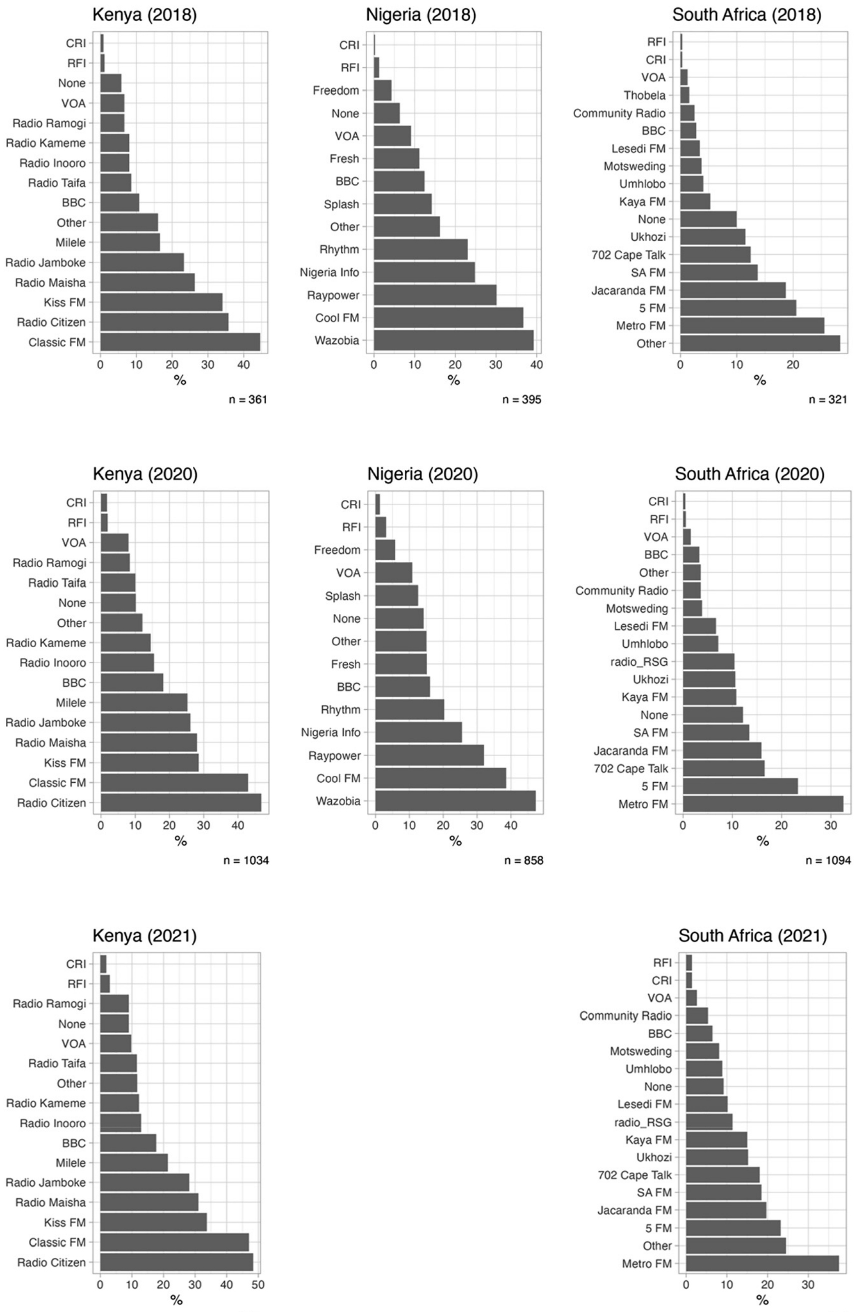

Figure 2: Listenership of selected stations in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa (2018–2021).

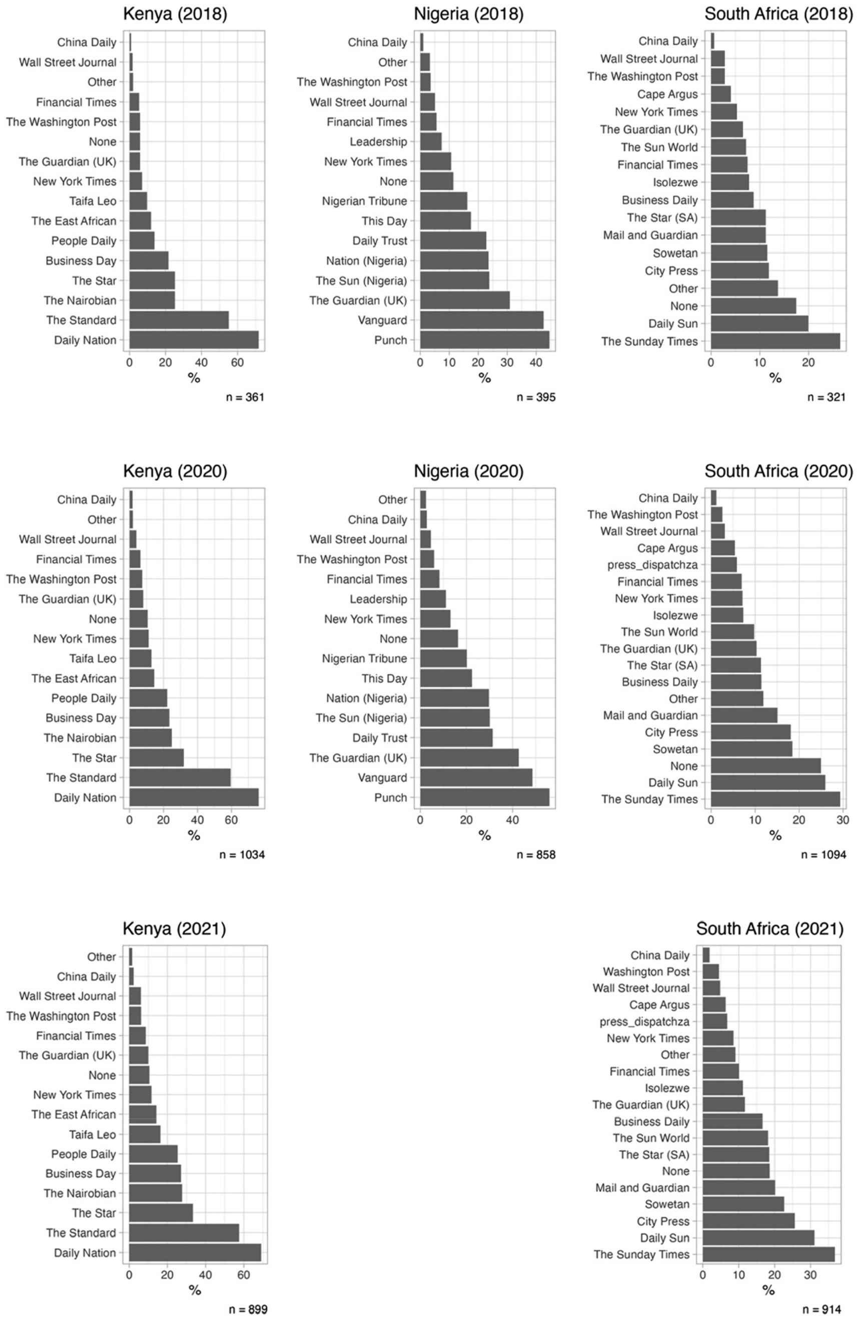

Figure 3: Readership of selected newspapers in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa (2018–2021).

of limited audience for Chinese media, particularly when looked in comparison to other "competing" news organizations with a global reach.

Not only is the audience of Chinese media houses smaller than that of other global media, but the perception media users have of them is also poorer. In response to RQ_2, we asked survey respondents to rank CGTN *vis-à-vis* four other international television networks. We focused on CGTN given that it appeared to be the most widely known of all Chinese news media organizations operating in Africa. We summarize the data for each of the four statements we presented to participants in Tables 2 and 3. Overall (i.e., when averaging the rank for all four questions), participants ranked BBC as the top station. In 2021, the score in Kenya was 2.00 and in South Africa 2.03 (with 1 being the highest score and 5 being the lowest). In all three countries, CNN came second (ranging from 2.12 in Nigeria in 2018 to 2.40 in South Africa in 2021), and Al-Jazeera third. CGTN's was ranked between third and fourth place, but predominantly in fourth place (Kenya 2021 = 3.72; South Africa 2021 = 3.62 and Nigeria 2018 = 3.48). We did not observe an improvement in the evaluations over time, but a slight worsening, even though the differences between years were not statistically significant. CGTN did score better than RT overall. In Table 3, data for each of the statements are disaggregated by country and by year. Survey respondents rank CGTN between third and fourth place in terms of trust, slightly above "It reports Africa well".

A unique contribution of this paper is the identification of a small group of individuals that self-identify as consumers of Chinese media. Approximately 2% of our respondents selected 2 or more Chinese sources from the list of media they consumed in the previous week. These are more predominantly males (59.2%) in their thirties (M = 33.2) with university degrees (61%). There's a larger number of these Chinese media consumers in Kenya, but there are no significant differences between countries. Their media diet is diverse: they consume Chinese media, but

Table 3: Evaluations of CGTN among Kenyans, Nigerians and South African along four dimensions (2018 & 2021).

	Kenya		Nigeria		South Africa	
	2018	**2021**	**2018**	**2021**[a]	**2018**	**2021**
CGTN can be trusted	3.55	3.77	3.52	–	3.42	3.68
CGTN reports Africa well	3.24	3.56	3.38	–	3.21	3.54
CGTN tells the truth	3.41	3.76	3.48	–	3.25	3.61
I know CGTN well	3.55	3.82	3.25	–	3.36	3.71
N =	361	899	395	–	321	1094

A score of 1 indicates best ranked, and a score of 5 indicates lowest rank; [a]The question was not asked in the Nigerian survey in 2021.

they are also heavier consumers of media in general than the rest of the sample. On a scale of 0–4, their overall news consumption is $M = 3.23$ as opposed to $M = 2.49$ for the rest. Chinese media consumers in our sample have a slightly better, yet not statistically significant, perception of CGTN ($M = 3.38$; $M = 3.61$), and they see China's presence in Africa (*issue involvement*) as a more important issue ($M = 3.24$) than the group that never consumes Chinese media ($M = 2.50$). Overall, their view of China (measured as the average of the six attitudes we measured) is significantly better ($M = 2.53$) than that of those who never consume Chinese media ($M = 1.81$).

With RQ_3, our focus was on examining the evolution of attitudes towards China before the COVID-19 pandemic (2017–2018), during the peak of the pandemic (mid-2020) and a year after the peak (mid-2021). As we show in Table 4, across the six items we used to construct our measure of *attitudes towards China*, and across the three countries, there was a noticeable dip in attitudes during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in Kenya and South Africa, the two countries for which we collected data in 2021 time, attitudes rebounded in 2021, although they did not reach 2018 levels. For instance, to the item "China is competently and honestly governed", on a scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), South Africans' responses range from 1.76 in 2018, to 1.56 in 2020 and 1.70 in 2021. The average score across all six items in South Africa in 2018 was 1.74, it went down to 1.54 in 2020 and grew again, but not fully recovered, to 1.69 in 2021. Across all but one of the statements ("China has a positive economic and political influence on Africa"), South Africans scored China below the "passing"

Table 4: Attitudes towards China in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa between 2018 and 2021.

	Kenya			**Nigeria**			**South Africa**		
	2018	**2020**	**2021**	**2018**	**2020**	**2021**	**2018**	**2020**	**2021**
China is competently and honestly governed	2.46	1.83	2.02	2.56	2.22	–	1.76	1.56	1.70
China is competently and honestly governed	2.20	1.70	1.92	2.40	2.14	–	1.69	1.56	1.62
China behaves responsibly to protect the environment	1.94	1.62	1.98	2.53	2.21	–	1.62	1.43	1.72
The media in China are free and objective	2.04	1.47	1.74	2.13	1.92	–	1.58	1.37	1.51
China has a positive economic and political influence on Africa	2.82	2.56	2.51	3.04	2.66	–	2.38	2.22	2.18
China is a country where I would like to live and work	1.89	1.15	1.47	2.17	1.89	–	1.38	1.12	1.38
N =	361	1034	899	395	858	–	321	1094	914

Scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

mark of 2. In Kenya, overall attitudes were significantly better than in South Africa, but similar patterns can be observed in our data. The average of the six measures in 2018 was 2.22 in Kenya, it went down to 1.72 in 2020 amidst the COVID-19 outbreak and went up 1.94 in 2021—still below the value for 2018. Attitudes towards China were, overall, most positive in Nigeria, where the average score in 2018 ($M = 2.47$; SD = 0.76) was significantly higher than in both Kenya and South Africa. While, in 2020, the score went down in Nigeria too ($M = 2.17$; SD = 0.93), it did not drop as much as in the other two countries. The higher values we observe in Nigeria are in line with those reported elsewhere (see, for example, Silver et al. 2020), where Nigerian attitudes towards China are always more positive that in other African countries such as Kenya and South Africa. Our data do not indicate that this is directly related to their higher levels of consumption of Chinese media.

Finally, to respond to RQ_4, which sought to assess the degree to which attitudes towards China might be related to the consumption of Chinese media, we fitted a linear regression model with *attitudes towards China* as the dependent variable. The results of the model are presented in Table 5. Only data from 2021 were used for this part of the analysis. After controlling for general media use and different demographic factors, the two strongest and significant predictors of better attitudes towards China appear to be *Chinese media consumption* ($ß = 0.18$, $p < 0.01$) and *subscription to StarTimes* ($ß = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$). In other words, the more Chinese media a respondent reported to be exposed to, the more positive their evaluation of China. In the opposite direction, we find that higher levels of self-reported *global media consumption* are associated with worse attitudes towards China ($ß = -0.05$, $p < 0.001$). We did not find a significant impact of an individual's views about CGTN on the dependent variable, but several of the control variables were found to be significant. *Issue salience* (i.e., how important a respondent feels China's relationship with Africa is to them) was negatively associated with attitudes towards China, while several general *media use* measures (TV, press and magazine) were found to be positively associated. In sum, for the relatively small number of people who are exposed to content from Chinese media in Kenya and South Africa, such exposure is linked to better attitudes towards the country.

6 Discussion and conclusion

This paper has shown that the consumption of Chinese media in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa is low, and has remained low over the years during which our study was conducted (2017–2021). We show that here is a much stronger preference across the three countries for local television stations or major international

Table 5: OLS Regression Coefficients (with confidence intervals) for attitudes towards China in Kenya and South Africa (2021).

Predictor	*b*	*b* 95% CI [LL, UL]	sr^2	sr^2 95% CI [LL, UL]
(Intercept)	2.91[b]	[2.47, 3.34]		
Age	−0.02[b]	[−0.03, −0.02]	0.08	[0.05, 0.10]
Gender (0 = male)	−0.07	[−0.17, 0.02]	0.00	[−0.00, 0.00]
Education	−0.03	[−0.06, 0.01]	0.00	[−0.00, 0.00]
Country (0 = South Africa)	−0.08	[−0.18, 0.02]	0.00	[−0.00, 0.00]
Chinese Media Consumption	0.18[b]	[0.06, 0.31]	0.00	[−0.00, 0.01]
Global Media Consumption	−0.05[b]	[−0.07, −0.02]	0.01	[−0.00, 0.01]
Evaluation of CGTN	−0.04	[−0.09, 0.02]	0.00	[−0.00, 0.00]
StarTimes Subscription	0.18[a]	[0.04, 0.31]	0.00	[−0.00, 0.01]
TV News Use	0.09[b]	[0.05, 0.13]	0.01	[0.00, 0.02]
Web News Use	−0.01	[−0.05, 0.03]	0.00	[−0.00, 0.00]
Radio News Use	0.02	[−0.02, 0.05]	0.00	[−0.00, 0.00]
Print News Use	0.06[a]	[0.01, 0.10]	0.00	[−0.00, 0.01]
Magazine News Use	0.08[b]	[0.03, 0.13]	0.00	[−0.00, 0.01]
Social Media News Use	−0.01	[−0.06, 0.04]	0.00	[−0.00, 0.00]
Issue Involvement	−0.06[b]	[−0.09, −0.02]	0.00	[−0.00, 0.01]
R^2	= 0.160[b]			
95% CI	[0.12, 0.18]			

[a] $p < 0.05$; [b] $p < 0.01$.

channels like Sky, BBC, and CNN. The same preference pattern can be noted in radio listenership. Local (community and national) radio channels were consistently the most popular, but international channels like BBC, VOA and RFI consistently outperformed CRI. When it comes to newspaper readership, domestic publications were by far the most preferred. International newspapers – US publications like the *Wall Street Journal* or the *New York Times* as well as UK publications such as *The Guardian* and the *Financial Times* were preferred over *China Daily,* which was consistently towards the bottom of the list. These findings confirm previous studies in which audiences seemed to be largely unaware of Chinese media on the continent (Gorfinkel et al. 2014), or displayed a lack of interest in Chinese media content (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2018).

More generally, our data show that non-Chinese international media perform generally better than Chinese ones among the audiences of the three countries under study. This is a trend that we observe when comparing audience preferences, brand recognition and credibility of both print and broadcast media over time. In all three countries, trust in CGTN was found to be low. When compared to other media, views of CGTN were less positive than towards CNN, BBC, and Al-Jazeera. Only RT was viewed more negatively than CGTN. These differences between broadcasters are worth exploring in future studies. Another question that we are unable to answer, but deserves further investigation, is how Chinese global media evaluate the success of their external communication activities. Some evidence exists that, on social media, quantity, rather than quality of content, is used as a criterion to evaluate the success of CGTN's international reach and influence. According to Li and Xu (2022), CGTN's social media team must meet daily targets of social media posts, even if this strategy might backfire, as followers could leave because they are inundated with posts. Whether this applies to other forms of media content that are harder to quantify remains an open question.

When considering general attitudes towards China, there was a slight drop in positive views during 2020. Bearing in mind that the second wave of the survey was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the data might indicate that attitudes were derailed by a single event, namely the pandemic and the associated negative discourses around China. There was a rebound in attitudes in 2021, which could have resulted from China's concerted efforts to counter negative reports and clear up controversies. It is difficult to pinpoint, however, whether this improvement was due to China's more active use of social media, its "vaccine diplomacy", or something else.

The main finding of the paper is that even though the audience for China's media is minimal, those who say that they consume Chinese media are more likely to hold more positive view towards China. While we cannot establish a causal relationship between media consumption and these attitudes, a logical conclusion would be to assume that more exposure to Chinese media leads to more positive attitudes. This finding might also confirm our previous research (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2018) which showed that those who consume Chinese media (i.e., some policy makers or journalists) are not necessarily more sympathetic of China, but the more they are exposed to Chinese media content, the higher the chance that some of the ideas presented on the media might resonate with them.

With our study, we are not only extending our understanding of the relationship between the consumption on English language Chinese media and audiences on the continent, but we are addressing three major methodological shortfalls of previous studies. One, our study has moved beyond considering only content or structural aspects of Chinese media, to examine the attitudes and preferences of audiences directly. Second, previous studies used small sample sizes to infer actual impact from perceived exposure to Chinese media. Instead, we measured the actual consumption of Chinese media and yielded findings about their usage, perceptions, and attitudes towards China. Most importantly, this study is the first to establish a link between Chinese media consumption and positive attitudes towards China. While it confirms that audience figures are small, it also suggests that China's mediated efforts might have an impact on audience attitudes.

Even though this paper addresses some of the methodological shortcomings of previous studies, it also has limitations. First, the sample size across the three waves is not consistent. This presents issues with the representativity of our data, which we are unable to overcome. However, we see this paper making an important contribution in that it is the first that, despite imperfectly, seeks to measure the audience of global Chinese media in the three countries. Furthermore, our samples are not nationally representative, nor can they speak of any other country other than those we study. The fact that no data is available for Nigeria in 2021 means that we cannot assume that the relationships we observe in Kenya and South Africa will also apply to Nigeria or other African countries. Future studies should use nationally representative samples that account for the wide diversity of lived experiences in African countries. The findings presented in the paper leave other questions in the air, such as: what motivates the consumption of Chinese media and what explains people's different views of global media from authoritarian regimes (e.g., RT or CGTN) and liberal democracies (e.g., BBC or CNN)? These should be addressed in future research.

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